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What's going around? A social network explanation of youth party membership

by Emilien Paulis

Abstract: Because people do not join political parties in a social vacuum but rather in close relation with their peers, this paper explores how the structure and composition of interpersonal, social networks affect youth party membership, and questions the answer's implications for recruitment. The structure does not affect statistically the young citizens' probability of becoming party members, as the process depends to a high degree on their proximate network core, e.g. their relatives, pointing towards a certain exclusivity in recruitment patterns and giving insight also on why they might stay away from conventional politics. A homogeneous composition matching with a high social and political profile is a pattern that has a considerable impact on their odds of joining a party, stressing that social networks can work in reproducing social and political inequalities, confining recruitment targets to the national population's most "usual suspects", and thereby explaining some difficulties faced by party organisations. Drawing on these findings, the conclusion discusses strategic considerations for Belgian parties.

Keywords: Youth, Party membership, Social network, Interpersonal relationship

Introduction

The celebration of the 50th anniversary of May 1968's events recalled that younger generations can generate large, mass social and political movements, by asking for more involvement and influence on the way politics is conducted. More broadly, May 1968 constitutes an historical shift in citizens' mentalities and attitudes towards traditional politics and embodies the materialisation of a latent citizen dissatisfaction challenging traditional institutions, which does not seem to have vanished since then. Notwithstanding, citizens' commitment to traditional politics, crudely measured through union and party membership, as well as more frequently through turnout, is clearly on the wane in most Western democracies (Norris 2002; Dalton 2008; Van Biezen et al. 2012). Looking at the decline of party membership more closely, both demand- and supply-side explanations are proposed (Köln 2014; Van Haute/Gauja 2015). On the one hand, the erosion of parties' recruiting capacity suggests a decreasing organisational density and less societal penetration, which are taken as indicators of party change or decline (Katz/Mair 1995; Van Biezen et al. 2012). This broadly negative picture about party membership could illustrate a larger democratic crisis, a gap between citizens and politics, questioning the role of these organisations as representative institutions. The progressive undermining of representative systems and their elites' legitimacy consequently reinforces the wider process of citizen disillusionment and partisan dealignment (Webb 2006; Dalton 2013; Smith 2014). The gap with the youth could be even deeper, especially regarding traditional parties embodying the "old politics" (Quintelier 2007; Mycock/Tonge 2012). This younger population segment is more interested in al-

ternative and less institutionalised forms of participation, undercutting parties' role as vehicles of their participation (Norris 2002; Loader et al. 2014). It is worth noting the exception of green parties, which stand out by being the party family recruiting the most among younger age cohorts and exhibiting positive trends in terms of membership figures over time in Europe (Delwit 2011; Van Haute/Gauja 2015). Furthermore, party membership decline is accelerated by the emergence of the Internet, social media and new technologies, which have decoupled the avenues and channels through which the citizens' voice might be heard, and thus affected the organisation and recruitment function of political parties (Dalton/Wattenberg 2000; Gibson 2017).

This broadly negative picture about party membership could illustrate a larger democratic crisis, a gap between citizens and politics, questioning the role of these organisations as representative institutions.

On the other hand, the literature agrees with a common feature: people who are male, older, better educated, politically interested, trusting of institutions, satisfied with democracy, identified with a party, and/or involved in civic participation are all the more likely to join a party (Seyd/Whiteley 2004; Heidar 2007; Van Haute/Gauja 2015). This main finding reflects the well-known social and political inequalities inherent to political participation and a certain lack of representativeness of party members. Hence, it is empirically acknowledged that younger people are less likely to join a party (Hooghe et al. 2004; Quintelier 2007) as they would be less concerned with and interested in politics, less politically knowledgeable, more apathetic, or participate less in other social or political activities (Roker 2005; O'toole et al. 2003). If it is puzzling to find out that macro evolutions – providing citizens with generally better access to resources of all kinds – have not translated into an increase of party members (Persson 2014), it is all the more intriguing regarding younger generations, which are supposed to have benefited the most from recent advances. What this calls for is to look for alternatives to aggregate-level patterns or individual-level dynamics driving party membership, especially regarding younger citizens who have *de facto* less resources and whose participation might be triggered and mediated by other factors. This paper puts the emphasis on one important and less systematically explored meso-level factor, interpersonal networks, and questions how it affects the chances of joining a party. The paper contends that individuals' political attitudes and behaviours do not form randomly, in a social vacuum, but in close relation and interaction with significant social peers. Hence, it is argued that it is not individual characteristics *per se* that matter for understanding party mobilisation, but rather individuals' features in relation with the characteristics of their proximate social environment. More specifically, social networks are expected to play

all the more in the process of younger citizens' party mobilisation for two reasons: (1) their political attitudes and behaviours are less stable, more volatile, and therefore more subject to peer-influence (Settle et al. 2011); (2) they reported proportionally the "someone asked" reason for joining as more important than their older fellows in this dataset (Paulis 2018).

The paper focuses, first, on the effect of the network structure (size/density), which is used as a proxy for social integration. Larger and denser networks are expected to increase the chances of joining a party. Second, the impact of network composition is explored in two areas: one hypothesis relates to the network nodes' social and political attributes and their homogeneity (in terms of political attitudes and socio-demographics), whereas another expectation pertains to attributes of the ties. Networks tending towards more similarity on high-level of attributes (positive attitudes, high socio-demographic profiles) are expected to affect positively the odds of joining a political party, reflecting that social networks could tend to reinforce participation inequalities rather than overcome them. Moreover, family ties are expected to remain the main channel of party membership for younger citizens. It would, it seems, point toward a certain exclusivity in recruitment patterns of political parties, despite macro socio-economic evolutions and organisational attempts that should have diversified the gates to enter parties as a member. These hypotheses are tested using cross-sectional survey data gathered online in 2016 among a representative sample of Belgian citizens (based on age, gender and region of residence). Furthermore, party membership appears a relevant dependent variable to measure young citizens' conventional participation in Belgium given that voting is compulsory.

[I]ndividuals' political attitudes and behaviours do not form randomly, in a social vacuum, but in close relation and interaction with significant social peers.

Theory

The paper tries somewhat to bridge the divide between the supply- and demand-side of party membership studies. Demand-side studies are interested in explaining party membership fluctuations as a result of macro-level societal evolutions or anchored in party organisation theories, whereas major accounts at the individual level (supply side) are inspired by classic theories of political participation (Leighley 1995). The "General Incentives Model" (Seyd/Whiteley 1992, 2002; Whiteley/Seyd 2002; Whiteley et al. 2006) provides tools for addressing issues such as who joins (resource model: socio-economic status), why (rational choice model: incentives and motivations), and what opinions they hold (socio-psychological model: political attitudes). Seyd and Whiteley's ground-breaking investigations on British party members sparked many other single-case (e.g. Gallagher et al. 2002; Heidar/Saglie 2003; Pedersen et al. 2004; Den Ridder et al. 2011; Lisi/Espritio Santo 2017) or comparative applications (Heidar 2007; Van Haute/Gauja 2015). All point towards a key empirical finding: higher socio-economic status and positive political attitudes make people more likely to join a party. If these explanations are robust, especially to account for youth party membership (Bruter/Harrison 2009), few contributions have really questioned how social networks might play a part in reproducing (or overcoming) social and political inequalities, mediat-

ing the membership process and thereby affecting the recruiting patterns of political parties.

Larger and denser networks are expected to increase the chances of joining a party.

While references to "social networks" in the main explanations of party membership can be found, to our knowledge, none used systematically Social Network Analysis (SNA) as theoretical and methodological background to operationalise the concept. A social network is defined as "a set of relationships between actors, or sets of actors" (Wasserman/Faust 1994). The adoption of such an approach supposes agreement with four essential assumptions: actors and their actions are viewed as interdependent rather than independent, autonomous units; relational ties between actors are channels for the transfer or "flow" of resources (either material or nonmaterial); models focusing on individuals view the network structural environment as providing opportunities for or constraints on individual action; network models conceptualise structure (social, economic, political and so forth) as lasting patterns of relations among actors. Political scientists studying conventional participation have long been dominated by the individualism of their field (Lazer 2011). This is intriguing as there is a strong SNA-based sociological tradition that stresses the influence played by networks in the process of involvement in unconventional forms of participation (Diani/McAdam 2003), which might have been applied to study conventional participation and engagement in political parties. Secondly, Columbia scholars laid the foundations for a network approach of traditional political behaviours, for instance with their two-step flow of communication theory that stresses the role of influential others in channelling political information between mass media and ordinary citizens. Some scholars have nonetheless reread the classic school of social influence through the lenses of social network theory and analysis (Eulau 1980; Knoke 1990; Huckfeldt et al. 2004; Zukerman 2005; Sinclair 2012), using genuine network data that were missing in the past. Overall, this line of research emphasises social networks and their features as significant factors shaping the process of electoral mobilisation (voting and campaign involvement) and vote choice. The influence of kinship, friendship, or weaker social ties as channels for political engagement is also a central topic of discussion (La Due Lake/Huckfeldt 1998; Zúñiga/Valenzuela 2011). Hence, these modern network theories of political participation and social influence provide interesting alternative theoretical avenues to cope with youth party membership, focusing either on the effects of network structure or composition (Knoke 1990).

[T]his line of research emphasises social networks and their features as significant factors shaping the process of electoral mobilisation (voting and campaign involvement) and vote choice.

In terms of structure, social network size and density can be used as a proxy for social integration, which has been demonstrated to impact positively the odds of participating in the political process (Knoke 1990; La Due Lake/Huckfeldt 1998; Teorell 2000; McClurg 2003; Sinclair 2012). An extensive social network supposes more connections to other social peers and extends the chances

of being related to people who are themselves already politically engaged and likely to affect the mobilisation process. Interpersonal networks allow the effective recruitment of people in political activities by helping exchanges of relevant political information and enlarging the exposure to, as well as understanding of, politics (Huckfeldt et al. 2004), reinforcing participation as a desirable social norm (Bond et al. 2017), and encouraging the circulation of various resources' (Jan 2009; Lim 2008; Lin 2008). Furthermore, a denser network, where peers know each other to a larger extent, supposes more fluid exchanges of information, but also more social cohesiveness, trust and pressure (Burt 2005), patterns that can affect the chances of joining, especially if those peers are already affiliated. In so far as younger citizens rely generally on smaller networks than their older fellows, the first hypothesis expects from those with larger and denser social networks to encourage party membership (*H1*).

In terms of composition, the focus can be, *first*, on the ties binding the network and the attributes of these relationships. To account for the fact that networks connect individuals who are tied to each other in varying degrees of closeness and intimacy, scholars distinguish between "strong" and "weak" ties (Granovetter 1973). The first ones are durable and established with intimates who provide support, are frequently in touch or are kin (Marsden 1990), whereas the second imply more social distance and less frequency of contact. Both types are shown to affect political participation (Lim 2008; Zuniga/Valenzuela 2011). Although early studies on personal influence emphasised the power of strong-tie networks for political recruitment (Katz/Lazarsfeld 1955), weak ties have become more prominent and more relevant for political participation as a result of the socio-economic modernisation process that tends to decrease social distance between individuals (Huckfeldt et al. 1995). While there is evidence supporting an increasing significance of weak ties for political involvement, the influence of strong relations must not be dismissed as sources of mobilisation in conventional participation (Zuckerman 2005; Cross/Young 2008). Networks dominated by strong ties tend to face less political disagreement and generate more participation in representative institutions (Mutz 2002). The second hypothesis expects family ties to remain the most significant channels of youth party membership (*H2*). Nonetheless, the mobilising role of strong ties could mean also that parties are quite exclusive in their recruitment patterns (Cross/Young 2008) and that if the family network core is not connected to politics, this configuration might be a crucial source of non-political engagement among young people.

An extensive social network supposes more connections to other social peers and extends the chances of being related to people who are themselves already politically engaged and likely to affect the mobilisation process.

Second, social networks of all kinds tend towards homophily in their composition (birds of a feather flock together, or the echo chamber effect): people sharing similar characteristics, or attributes, tend to cluster together within social networks (McPherson et al. 2001; Lazer et al. 2009; Evans/Fu 2018). Social network effects are tricky to grasp because networks do not form randomly. Individuals are at once "creators and captives" of their social networks: they generate intentionally their networks throughout

their life, and form ties with similar and like-minded others (social selection), but these networks, in turn, provide constraints and opportunities on their life choices (social influence). Adapted to the political realm, a dynamic process of co-evolution between individuals' political attitudes and behaviours and their networks can be found: they tend to become more similar to and to comply with their network fellows in terms of political views, but they also look for politically similar others. This paper is interested in the effect of homogeneous network composition, leaving aside the issue of network diversity. It assumes that homophily, or the congruence that may exist in a network – meaning that ego (survey respondent) and alters (network peers) are similar on a given attribute (same views, values, opinions, socio-demographic profile, etc.), and that these attributes are positive (e.g. congruent on a high level of interest or satisfaction) – might be an important factor influencing the odds of joining a party among the youth. Homophilic networks converging towards a higher level of social and political attributes are expected to increase the chance of a young citizen joining a party (*H3*). The hypothesis is discussed, nonetheless, as to whether social networks might actually work in reproducing social and political inequalities, embedding and confining people in a highly homogeneous environment, and thereby bringing less diversity in party recruitment patterns (similar "high" profiles predominantly recruited by parties).

[I]f the family network core is not connected to politics, this configuration might be a crucial source of non-political engagement among young people.

Data and methods

Data collection

Acknowledging that it is a widespread, conventional technique to collect and generate information on party membership (Scarow/Gezgor 2010; Whiteley 2011; Ponce/Scarow 2016) and social networks (Marsden 2011; Crossley et al. 2015), the paper capitalised on a cross-sectional survey to gather original data. It was conducted online by an external company (Qualtrics) between June and July 2016 among a non-random quota sample of 2,801 Belgian citizens, based on the Belgian population's characteristics (gender, age, and region of residence). Regarding networks specifically, relying on an online survey platform "*substantially reduces the costs, time and fatigue in managing the complex questionnaire required for data collection of ego-centered data*" (Manfreda et al. 2004: 295), and moderates the face-to-face or phone-call interviewer effect (Eagle/Proeshold-Bell 2015). Moreover, it could lead sometimes to a better quality and reliability of network data (Coromina/Coenders 2006; Matzat/Snijders 2010).

Two main components were encompassed in the design of the questionnaire. First, traditional sets of questions existing in survey research into political participation (Gibson/Cantijoch 2013) were used to collect information on the respondents themselves: their political behaviours (party membership and other forms of participation), political attitudes (satisfaction, interest, and party identification), and socio-demographics (gender, education, and age). Second, as the primary purpose was to capture social networks as the main independent variable, the most critical methodological issue was to generate network data for each respondent. This type of network survey measurement supposes collecting

egocentric, personal network data, as everything is elicited from the perspective of one respondent (ego). The research opts for the most common and straightforward tool to reach them: the name-generating procedure (Burt 1984), consisting in a three-step process.¹

First, the “name-generator” elicits a list of individuals’ names on the basis of a specific social interaction. In this study, respondents were asked to name up to 10 “significant others”, i.e. people who are particularly important to them and with whom they have regular contact (Crossley et al. 2015). Second, the “name-interrelater” asks about potential connections between these “alters” (i.e. whether they know each other). This step enables the egocentric network to turn into small sociometric networks and to bring network density into the equation (Aeby 2016). These two first steps are essential as they allow researchers to map the structure of the network and then to reach related indicators (network size and density). Third, the “name-interpreter” consists in collecting information (attributes) about network nodes and relationships (network composition). On the one hand, respondents had to specify in a pre-defined list of nine social ties how they were connected to their network peers.² On the other, they reported, for their peers, similar information to what they did for themselves: socio-demographics (age, gender, education), political attitudes (interest, satisfaction, party identification) and behaviours (party membership and other forms of political participation).³

The Belgian population constitutes a relevant and fruitful empirical case to investigate the network mechanism of (youth) party membership for two reasons. First, voting being compulsory, the main measurement of (youth) conventional participation is party membership. Second, although Belgian parties have faced membership loss (Van Haute et al. 2013), they have been less affected than other Western democracies (Scarrow/Gezgor 2010). The proportion of the national population affiliated to a party remains rather significant, probably due to the historical societal penetration of mass Belgian parties in their own pillar (Deschouwer 2012). Moreover, membership in youth party organisations being a crucial pre-requisite for a political career in Belgian politics (Hooghe et al. 2004), it means that parties do recruit younger citizens via, among other things, their youth organisations. Therefore, there are samples of (young) party members that can be reached prospectively or retrospectively in order to test new hypotheses.

Homophilic networks converging towards a higher level of social and political attributes are expected to increase the chance of a young citizen joining a party.

Data analysis

Once collected, raw survey data were cleaned and split into two distinct datasets. The first one includes only network data collected through the name-generating procedure, organised to be computed in E-Net software (Haglin/Borgatti 2012). The latter permits one social network analysis treating the 2801 networks, visualising them and exporting derived structural as well as compositional variables. The second dataset centralises both network-level (IV) and individual-level (DV) derived variables in order to run summary and multivariate analyses via standard statistical software (SPSS).

Data description, operationalisation and bivariate statistics

Dependent variable: party membership

Not surprisingly given existing empirical contributions in the field (Bruter/Harrison 2009; Bennie/Russel 2012), the survey emphasises young citizens’ low level of involvement in political parties (see Figure 1 below). Among the 18-35 years’ cohort, 4.3% of respondents reported to be currently affiliated to a political party. In contrast, this figure rises to 7.2% for older categories, which points to a generational difference in favour of the oldest, all the more if former members are counted too.

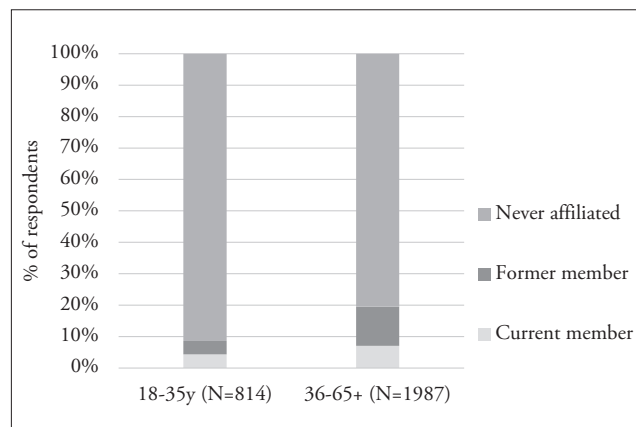


Figure 1: Party membership differential between young and old respondents

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of party members among the sample of respondent according the two age groups guiding the empirical analysis. It points out respondents’ low level of involvement in Belgian political parties, notably among the youth.

From this information, one binary dependent variable “party membership” was recoded for each respondent (see Table 1). To satisfy analytical requirements and overcome the small N of current young members, as well as given their singular profiles compared to the rest of the population (Paulis 2018), respondents who have never been formally affiliated to a political party and never socialised in a party organisation were distinguished from former and current members (0 never affiliated; 1 former/current member). The dependent variable’s binary form led to the performance of logistic regressions in order to gauge the effect of different independent variables, i.e. social network structure and composition.

		N	Min	Max	Mean	Std Dev
Party membership	18-35y	814	0	1	.09	.281
	36-65y+	1987	0	1	.18	.384
	Total	2801	0	1	.15	.359

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of party membership (DV)

Independent variables: social network structure and composition

Regarding network structure, two indicators are taken into account as a proxy for social integration. First, network size refers to the number of people named in the name-generator. It ranges from 1 to 10 for respondents who took the opportunity to the full and named 10 network peers.⁴ On average, respondents named between 6 and 7 “significant others” (6.2). Second, social network density describes the connectivity among respondents’ social networks, based on the ties reported in the name-interrelater. The

		N	Min	Max	Mean	Std Dev
Network size	18-35y	814	1	10	5.9	3.525
	– Member	70			5.8	
	– Non-member	1631			5.9	
	36-65+	1987	1	10	6.3	3.495
	– Member	356			6.7	
	– Non-member	1631			5.9	
	Total	2801	1	10	6.2	3.508
Network density	18-35y	814	0	1	.49	.351
	– Member	70			.55	
	– Non-member	1631			.48	
	36-65+	1987	0	1	.52	.347
	– Member	356			.53	
	– Non-member	1631			.51	
	Total	2801	0	1	.51	.348

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of network structure (IV)

indicator ranges from 0 to 1, when all the nodes are connected to each other and form a perfect “clique”. The mean value for the whole population (.51) suggests that, on average, half of potential ties were effective in the observed networks. This relatively high density ratio reflects the very social nature of networks mapped in this research and the pre-dominance of strong ties in respondents’ proximate environment (see below), which suppose *de facto* more chances for alters to know each other and consequently to be tied

		N	Min	Max	Mean	Std Dev	p value ANOVA
Spouse	18-35	814	0	1	.46	.518	.217
	– Member	70			.41		
	– Non-member	744			.47		
	36-65+	1987	0	2	.44	.511	
	– Member	356			.48		
	– Non-member	744			.43		
	Total	2801	0	3	.4	.513	
DNA family	18-35	814	0	10	1.16	1.465	.423
	– Member	70			.9		
	– Non-member	744			1.18		
	36-65+	1987	0	10	1.13	1.665	
	– Member	356			1.04		
	– Non-member	744			1.15		
	Total	2801	0	10	1.1	1.609	
Extended family	18-35	814	0	9	.79	1.382	.000
	– Member	70			.76		
	– Non-member	744			.8		
	36-65+	1987	0	10	1.1	1.692	
	– Member	356			1.1		
	– Non-member	744			1.1		
	Total	2801	0	10	1.03	1.615	
Friend	18-35	814	0	10	2.42	1.5	.025
	– Member	70			2.2		
	– Non-member	744			2.4		
	36-65+	1987	0	10	2.17	2.454	
	– Member	356			2.4		
	– Non-member	744			2.1		
	Total	2801	0	10	2.24	2.511	

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of network composition: social ties (IV)

to each other. Bivariate analyses suggest that younger respondents have slightly smaller and less dense networks than older ones (see Table 2). More striking is how “old” party members have larger networks compared to younger members and older unaffiliated citizens, whereas young party members stand out from the rest with much denser networks.⁵ Hence, multivariate analyses should help in untangling whether the effect of network size and density has to be distinguished at the network structural level.

Data description becomes more interesting when looking at the composition of social networks. Regarding the attributes of relationships, relatives (spouse, DNA and extended family) represent more than 42.4% of the people named by the respondents, pointing to the prominence of strong ties. In contrast, weaker social ties are less frequently named as significant others. Eight continuous independent variables summarise the number of alters in each category (see Table 3). When disaggregating between the two age groups, younger respondents tend to name fewer relatives belonging to their extended family, more friends, and less weak ties (members met in the organisation, professional advisors or acquaintances). Interestingly, taking party membership into account, if young party members report fewer friends than young non-affiliates, the reverse holds for older members. Overall, bivariate analyses support the idea that younger, and, above all, older party members present more tie diversity in their networks, reporting proportionally fewer close relatives and more distant social relations, and suggesting the potential role of weak ties.

Regarding the attributes of network nodes, Tables 4 and 5 put in perspective the descriptive statistics of the social (Table 4) and political (Table 5) features of respondents and their alters. In terms

		N	Min	Max	Mean	Std Dev	p value ANOVA
Colleague	18-35	814	0	8	.53	1.193	.859
	– Member	70			.6		
	– Non-member	744			.5		
	36-65+	1987	0	10	.5	1.214	
	– Member	356			.4		
	– Non-member	744			.5		
	Total	2801	0	10	.51	1.208	
Organisation member	18-35	814	0	8	.16	.633	.000
	– Member	70			.3		
	– Non-member	744			.1		
	36-65+	1987	0	10	.37	1.172	
	– Member	356			.3		
	– Non-member	744			.6		
	Total	2801	0	10	.31	1.049	
Professional advisor	18-35	814	0	7	.18	.682	.000
	– Member	70			.2		
	– Non-member	744			.1		
	36-65+	1987	0	10	.37	1.009	
	– Member	356			.4		
	– Non-member	744			.3		
	Total	2801	0	10	.31	.930	
Acquaintance	18-35	814	0	2	.02	.151	.046
	– Member	70			.06		
	– Non-member	744			.02		
	36-65+	1987	0	7	.04	.306	
	– Member	356			.06		
	– Non-member	744			.04		
	Total	2801	0	7	.04	.270	

of socio-demographics (gender, age and education), the profiles of respondents and alters are quite similar. Three observations deserve to be stressed, however. First, respondents tend to name to a larger extent alters belonging to the same age group as themselves. Second, younger respondents reported higher levels of education for themselves and their alters than older participants, indicating the younger generations' better access to education. Third, the gender gap in favour of male party members (Van Haute/Gauja 2015) is confirmed and all the more supported regarding younger party members, while both young and old party members reported proportionally more females in their networks than unaffiliated respondents. Given the theoretical argument developed by the paper, the EI index of homophily (Crossley et al. 2015) is applied to measure the similarity, or congruence between ego and alters on each socio-demographic attribute. Despite relatively similar mean values for ego and alters, the index indicates networks converging rather towards social heterophily (negative scores). There is a slight contrast between younger and older citizens' social networks, with the former facing somewhat more homophily in terms of age than the latter. Furthermore, respondents identified as unaffiliated have more homophily in their network than non-members when education is scrutinised, while young party members obviously stand out from older party members (as well as other respondents) with much less gender homophily. When jumping to political attitudes, if respondents are more interested in politics than satisfied with the way democracy works, this observation is valid also for their alters. Obviously, party members display more positive political attitudes for themselves and their close environment than unaffiliated respondents, and this trend is even more marked among younger members. The

				Ego		Alters		Homophily	
		N	Min	Max	Mean	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
Age	18-35	814	1	3		1.4	-1	1	-.219
	– Member	70				1.4			-.291
	– Non-member	744				1.4			-.213
	36-65+	1987	1	3		2.2	-1	1	-.334
	– Member	356				2.2			-.313
	– Non-member	744				2.2			-.331
	Total	2801	1	3		1.9	-1	1	-.3
Gender	18-35	814	0	1	.4	.4	-1	1	-.281
	– Member	70			.7	.4			-.351
	– Non-member	744			.4	.5			-.274
	36-65+	1987	0	1	.5	.4	-1	1	-.272
	– Member	356			.6	.4			-.235
	– Non-member	744			.5	.5			-.280
	Total	2801	0	1	.5	.4	-1	1	-.275
Education	18-35	814	1	4	2.7	2.6	-1	1	-.389
	– Member	70			2.9	2.7			-.431
	– Non-member	744			2.7	2.6			-.385
	36-65+	1987	1	4	2.5	2.5	-1	1	-.392
	– Member	356			2.7	2.7			-.408
	– Non-member	744			2.5	2.5			-.388
	Total	2801	1	4	2.6	2.6	-1	1	-.391

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of network composition (IV): social attributes

indexes of attitudinal homophily computed on that basis reveal that respondents' networks tend more towards political heterophily (negative scores), and again despite the very similar mean values for ego and alters. However, the EI index for party identification is very close to zero (-.1) and turns positive (i.e. homophilic) when party members are distinguished from other respondents. Interestingly, the homophily based on party identification is stronger among young party members. Finally, in terms of political behaviours, one variable controls for exposure to party membership. The mean value is as low (.1) as for respondents, but logically increases when networks of both younger and older party members are distinguished. Almost a half of their alters for which information is available tends to be generally affiliated to a party as well.

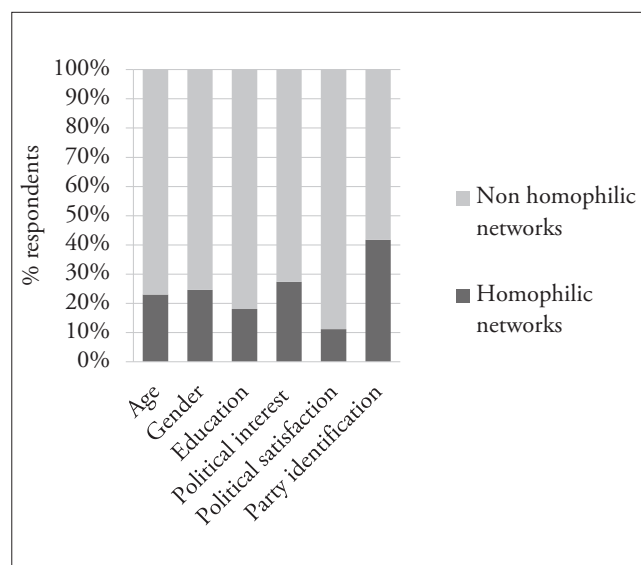
Overall, descriptive and bivariate statistics suggest three important nuances to our first expectations, which are assessed through the next multivariate models. First, if party members have generally larger and denser networks than unaffiliated citizens, it does not seem to be the case for young party members, but should rather be related to older members' structural patterns. Second, in so far as party members have more tie diversity in their networks, weaker social ties might be also relevant channels of party membership. Third, party members display, in fact, less homophily than unaffiliated citizens within their social networks, except when political satisfaction and, above all, party identification are scrutinised. Hence, multivariate analyses further question whether it might be that homophily, to affect party membership, is mediated by the level of the concerned attribute. To answer this, two types of independent variables were finally computed. Respondents were reorganised into categories according to the feature of their network composition in two ways (see the distribution in Figure 2):

				Ego		Alters		Homophily	
		N	Min	Max	Mean	Mean	Min	Max	Mean
Political interest	18-35	814	1	4	2.5	2.5	-1	1	-.2
	– Member	70			3.1	2.8			-.4
	– Non-member	744			2.4	2.4			-.2
	36-65+	1987			2.7	2.5			-.2
	– Member	346			3.2	2.7			-.3
	– Non-member	1631			2.6	2.4			-.2
	Total	2801			2.6	2.5			-.2
Political satisfaction	18-35	814	1	4	2.3	2.4	-1	1	-.6
	– Member	70			2.6	2.7			-.4
	– Non-member	744			2.2	2.3			-.6
	36-65+	1987			2.1	2.1			-.7
	– Member	346			2.2	2.3			-.6
	– Non-member	1631			2	2.1			-.7
	Total	2801			2.2	2.2			-.7
Party identification	18-35	814	0	1	.7	.7	-1	1	-.1
	– Member	70			.9	.9			.4
	– Non-member	744			.6	.7			-.1
	36-65+	1987	0	1	.7	.7	-1	1	-.1
	– Member	346			.8	.8			.2
	– Non-member	1631			.6	.7			-.1
	Total	2801	0	1	.7	.7	-1	1	-.1
Party membership	18-35	814	0	1	.2	.1			
	– Member	70				.5			
	– Non-member	744				.1			
	36-65+	1987	0	1	.2	.1			
	– Member	346				.4			
	– Non-member	1631				.1			
	Total	2801	0	1	.1	.1			

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of network composition (IV): political attributes

first, whether the network that they belong to tends to be homophilic on a given social or political attribute (i.e. positive EI score recoded into 1, versus the other, 0), and, second, whether this network tends to be “positively” homophilic, meaning congruent on a higher score or categories (1: yes; otherwise, 0)

Attribute homophily (binary)



Positive attribute homophily (binary)

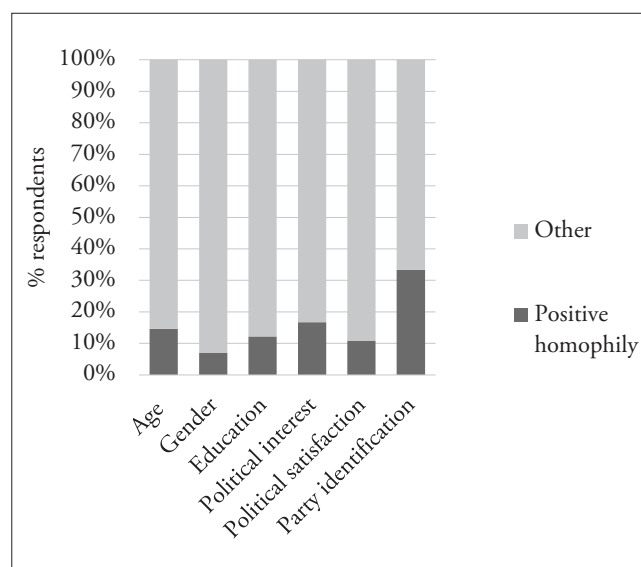


Figure 2: Distribution of (positive) attribute homophily (IV)

The upper figure illustrates the distribution of homophilic networks on each social and political attribute among the sample of respondents, operationalised as binary variable (1=homophilic network, i.e. positive EI index - dark grey; 0 = heterophilic, i.e. negative EI index – light grey). The lower figure shows the distribution of the variables measuring more specifically when homophily coincides with higher attribute scores or categories (dark grey).

The following paragraphs present the results of two sets of empirical models. The first one (M1) focuses on the effect of network structure (size and density) and one component of network composition: social and political homophily. The second (M2) looks more closely at the effect of social ties on the chances of joining a party.

Multivariate analysis

Network structure

The first set of models' output (M1) presented by Table 6 suggests interesting results regarding the effect of network structure on the probability of joining a party. Both social network size and density follow the positive relation expected by the theoretical hypothesis, although it is statistically significant only regarding network size. Furthermore, the model confirms the nuances implied by bivariate analyses. On the one hand, social network size increases positively the odds of party membership, but this effect prevails significantly only for older respondents. On the other hand, network density seems to affect more youth party membership when coefficients and odds ratios are considered. However, the relationship turns out to be never statistically significant in the model. These results do not provide enough empirical evidence supporting our first hypothesis (H1) but suggest one major observation: the effects of network size and density must be distinguished, as the former affects to a larger extent older citizens' party membership, whereas the latter seems more relevant to approaching youth party engagement. It will be further argued that this finding should, in fact, be discussed in the light of the nature of ties binding the structure. Indeed, network size is a relevant variable to consider in the process of party membership when people get older and have built larger interpersonal networks. Larger networks suppose more weak ties, more alters belonging to different social circles and are thus less likely to know each other because of their social distance (picturing a larger network horizon). This situation translates into sparser networks for people under 35 years, a less important effect of density, but more of network size. From this, as already suggested by bivariate statistics, a pool of weak ties might be expected to be the determinant for a network to trigger party membership, but rather for older people. Overall, our finding is in line with those showing that a larger set of relations *per se* is a determinant for being integrated into the political process, enlarging the pool from which the mobilising trigger can be activated, diversifying and or reinforcing surrounding political views, attitudes, beliefs or norms (McClurg 2003). Nonetheless, the analysis shows that this effect holds mainly for older citizens and not for the youth. In contrast, the latter have smaller networks, dominated by strong ties, therefore implying more density likely to affect their party mobilisation. Having denser rather than larger networks might be hypothesised as a crucial explanation of why young people tend to get involved (especially if this dense network is made up of politically active agents), but also to remain aside from politics. As the influence on party membership comes rather from strong ties (see below), or (a rather small number of) very close peers who probably know each other because they are kin (which explains the higher coefficient for network density among the youth, meaning more social pressure to conform), if this proximate micro-environment is not positively orientated towards politics, a phenomenon that is increasingly recognised at the aggregate and individual level in Western democracies (Norris 2011; Ezrow/Xezonakis 2016), there are great chances that this young person will remain isolated from the political process by the effect of social influence and pressure.

If controlling for network peers' party membership, the significant effect of network size remains stable, and is even reinforced. It thus provides empirical support that the higher the proportion of alters that are party members in a network, the higher the

chances for ego to join a party as well. This finding is replicated across all age categories and confirms a major trend stressed by innovation studies (Rogers 2003), epidemiology (Valente 1995), but also by election network scholars studying voting contagion (Nickerson 2008): being exposed in a larger extent to a certain behaviour in a social network increases the odds for the network nodes to comply with each other and adopt the same behaviour.

Network composition: social homophily

The regression model reveals important findings regarding the role of social homophily in the process of joining a party. In absolute terms, citizens relying on a socially homophilic network show a negative propensity to be affiliated to a political party. In

contrast, what seems to matter to turn party member is rather having a diverse network in terms of age (highly see ⁶), gender (relatively s.) and education (negative coefficient but n.s). Looking more closely at the results for both age groups under scrutiny (18-34y vs 35-65+), the analysis allows some refinement of the above-mentioned effects. First, although a larger coefficient for younger respondents, age homophily prevents significantly more membership among older respondents. Second, the negative relationship between gender homophily and party membership turns out to be statistically significant only for young participants, stressing the other way around how gender diversity might appear as a crucial feature to trigger youth party membership. Third, education homophily turns statistically significant for older respond-

Network structure							18-34		35 and more			
	B (SE)	OR	B (SE)	OR	B (SE)	OR	B (SE)	OR	B (SE)	OR	B (SE)	OR
Size	.029 (.017)	1.136	.106*** (.024)	1.112	.088*** (.124)	1.092	.032 (.059)	1.032	.079*** (.025)	1.082	.127*** (.026)	1.136
Density	.159 (.173)	1.172	.115 (.179)	1.122	.124 (.183)	1.133	.470 (.385)	1.600	.069 (.189)	1.072	.119 (.198)	1.126
Network composition												
Social homophily												
Age			-.296 (.158)	.744	-2.158*** (.456)	.116	-4.623 (3.177)	.010	-2.039** (.490)	.130	-1.929*** (.481)	.145
Gender			-.211 (.156)	.810	-1.251** (.475)	.286	-3.444* (1.580)	.032	-.865 (.490)	.421	-1.086* (.503)	.337
Education			-.448** (.168)	.639	-.887 (.596)	.412	1.156 (1.335)	3.177	-1.309* (.645)	.270	-.544 (.628)	.581
Political homophily												
Interest			-.158 (.133)	.854	-2.554*** (.536)	.078	-5.429*** (1.700)	.004	-1.985*** (.523)	.137	-1.649*** (.540)	.192
Satisfaction			.400** (.164)	1.492	-2.060 (3.57)	.127	2.838 (8.091)	17.074	-3.812 (4.012)	.022	-3.290 (3.759)	.037
Identification			1.076*** (.118)	2.932	.027 (.311)	1.027	-.681 (.991)	.506	-.104 (.323)	.901	.424 (.320)	1.528
Social homophily (+)												
Age					.872*** (.186)	2.393	3.938 (2.732)	41.336	.730** (.316)	2.076	.690*** (.197)	1.994
Gender					2.027* (.861)	7.591	5.661* (2.691)	287.504	1.493 (895)	4.452	1.552* (.916)	4.722
Education					.196 (.218)	1.217	-.491 (.477)	.612	.344 (.238)	1.411	.094 (.233)	1.099
Political homophily (+)												
Interest					.835*** (.171)	2.305	1.740*** (.523)	5.700	.629*** (.168)	1.876	.551*** (.175)	1.734
Satisfaction					.959 (1.435)	2.610	-.961 (3.243)	.383	1.647 (1.615)	5.189	1.459 (1.512)	4.302
Identification					1.073*** (.313)	2.923	1.981* (.991)	7.247	1.138*** (.328)	3.122	.316 (.327)	1.372
Membership exposure											2.578*** (.181)	13.174
Constant	-1.944*** (.157)	.143	-2.799*** (.195)	.061	-2.614*** (.196)	.073	-3.184*** (.409)	.041	-2.297*** (.328)	.101	-3.346*** (.224)	.035
χ ²	152.826		206.723		176.995		60.170		139.965		222.350	
R ² Nagelkerke	.3		7.9		13.8		18.8		11.4		27.1	
N	2801		2801		2801		814		1987		2801	

Table 6: Logistic regression table (M1) – DV = party membership (binary)

ents only (negative coefficient), meaning that networks which are homogeneous in terms of education decrease older respondents' probability of membership. Interestingly, the coefficient for education homophily turns positive for the youngest but is not statistically significant.

Although these findings point towards more prominence of social heterogeneity playing the process of joining a party, the part of the model taking into consideration whether social homophily is "positive", i.e. revealing homogeneity in higher categories of social attributes, does provide another story compared to the previous step. The results emphasise how networks' homogeneous social composition can work in sparking party membership, but actually by reproducing, at the network level, aggregate and individual-level social inequalities well-known in party membership studies – especially regarding the involvement of the youth as well as the male bias. Overall, the more network congruence on higher categories of age (highly s.), gender (relatively s.), and education (positive coefficient but n.s.), the more ego's chances of joining a political party. These results corroborate, at least partially at this point, the second hypothesis about the effect of homophily: when social homophily with higher socio-demographic background is observed, the statistical relationship with party membership turns positive. These results can be read in the light of membership shortage and interpreted as showing that, in fact, most party organisations are doomed to recruit predominantly among the most "usual suspects" (Campbell 2013) of their national population: the oldest, the men and the most educated. The social networks of their current members connect them to a pool of prospective members that have largely the same social profile, struggling therefore to diversify their social basis and to reach alternative targets that might join the organisation. Disaggregating between both age groups, some refinements can be put forward. First, positive age homophily encourages significantly only the membership of older respondents, and this is so despite a larger coefficient for the youth. Overall, (positive) age homophily does not encourage or impede statistically the youth party membership process in our model. In contrast, second, homophily based on the male sex greatly increases the odds of joining for young people, while the smaller, positive coefficient of the older group does not remain statistically significant. It implies that the individual-level gender bias in favour of the men found in many party membership studies works also at the level of social networks, but affects statistically significantly more the membership process of young respondents. Finally, although never statistically significant, the homophily based on higher level of education displays a positive relationship to party membership throughout the model, turning nonetheless negative when young citizens are strictly analysed. The latter observation might be related to studies showing that the aggregate increase of education levels did not translate into more membership at the individual level (Persson 2014), especially among the youth. In the same way, we might argue that a higher network-level of education for younger generations does not coincide with a higher probability for them to join a party – and might even imply the opposite relations (negative coefficient, but n.s.), because educational attainment is probably a merely individual-level characteristic: citizens attend school and earn diplomas "alone". Education is thus an issue for what social networks can bring to our explanation of political participation, except if we think about the status conferred by the education en-

vironment (Campbell 2013). One hypothesis to further explore seems that nowadays young people are embedded in networks where the level of education plays a less determinant role for driving their behaviours towards political parties than was the case for their older fellows, mainly because it does not confer on them the same social status.

The social networks of their current members connect them to a pool of prospective members that have largely the same social profile, struggling therefore to diversify their social basis and to reach alternative targets[.]

Network composition: political homophily

Regarding political homophily, the results must be distinguished depending on the type of political attitudes, as they are more contrasted. First, the relationship between homophily based on political interest and party membership is the most clear-cut. If the analysis supports rather that relying on homogeneous networks in terms of political interest *per se* decreases the odds of joining a party – all the more for younger respondents (larger negative coefficient than older ones) – when the level on which the similarity occurs is taken into account (i.e. positive or not), the outcome shows that homophily based on higher levels of political interest does increase the chances of joining a party, especially among younger respondents who have a higher positive coefficient and odds ratio than older ones. Second, regarding homophily based on political satisfaction, results are more difficult to grasp. The variable measuring homophily based on this attitude in absolute terms loses its statistical significance and becomes negatively associated with party membership when the term measuring whether the homophily is positive (congruence on higher levels of satisfaction) is included. Despite being not statistically significant, the last step of the model gives some empirical credit to the idea that similarity on higher levels of satisfaction affects positively the chances to be recruited by a political party. It seems to hold, however, more for old than young respondents, for which the coefficient turns negative when the analysis is run independently. Hence, the results suggest that it might be negative homophily (i.e. on lower levels of satisfaction, suggesting that ego is importantly exposed to a feeling of disenchantment towards democracy in his/her micro-environment) that is rather a network pattern that spurs youth party membership. In contrast, when young people tend to be homogeneously surrounded by positive feelings towards democracy, they probably do not feel the need or interest to mind the gap and engage themselves in institutionalised politics. More largely, other analyses performed on these data have shown that how people perceive their network in terms of satisfaction is a crucial determinant for explaining why citizens favour protest forms of political participation as well as identifying with more extreme parties (Paulis/Close 2018). Third and finally, in absolute terms, homophily based on party identification increases the chances of joining a political party. The positive coefficient nonetheless loses its statistical significance in favour of the variable measuring whether the congruence takes place on a positive score of identification (meaning that network fellows similarly identified with a party). Indeed, the latter variable is highly statistically significant, even when younger and older respondents are distinguished. The odds ratio and the coefficient support a stronger impact on youth party membership though. From this, it can be interpreted again

that parties are quite exclusive in their recruitment as they enlist from among the “usual suspects” of their national population: the most interested (significantly more among the youth), the most satisfied (except for the youngest) and those who identified with a party (slightly stronger among the youth). The political homogeneity of their current members’ social networks prevents them from reaching alternative political profiles and diversifying the political views that are integrated into their organisation.

[W]hen young people tend to be homogeneously surrounded by positive feelings towards democracy, they probably do not feel the need or interest to [...] engage themselves in institutionalised politics.

The empirical analysis clearly demonstrated that, to a certain extent and under certain conditions, homophily can be a network compositional configuration that affects party membership by reproducing, at the network level, social and political inequalities usually established by individual or aggregate patterns, supporting the third hypothesis (H3). Controlling for the proportion of party

members in the network did not modify significantly our findings, except that network variables related to party identification quite logically lose their statistical significance. More importantly, it allows our general model to double the Nagelkerke-explained variance from 13.8% to 27.1% (see Table 6).

Network composition: social ties

To avoid overloading the first, a second set of models (M2) is developed to answer which type of ties is the most important channel of youth party membership. Single terms (see Table 7 below) pertaining to the different social ties included in the first step suggest that respondents who mention more acquaintances have a higher probability of being a party member, but that this effect is mainly true of older respondents. We have earlier argued that this might be closely related to the effect of network size, the impact of which on party membership also holds only for older respondents. The latter having larger networks, they have also a higher likelihood of reporting social distance in their networks, and therefore of having the presence of acquaintances affecting positively their probability of joining a political party. More interestingly, when the interac-

							18-34y		35-65+	
	B (S.E.)	OR	B (S.E.)	OR	B (S.E.)	OR	B (S.E.)	OR	B (S.E.)	OR
Spouse	.154 (.105)	1.167	.263* (.113)	1.300	.111 (.141)	1.118	.399 (.359)	1.490	.066 (.158)	1.069
DNA relative	-.047 (.036)	.954	.030 (.037)	1.030	-.076 (.049)	.927	-.290 (.155)	.748	-.056 (.052)	.945
Extended family	.022 (.033)	1.022	.064 (.035)	1.063	-.008 (.045)	.992	-.107 (.147)	.467	-.016 (.048)	.984
Friend	.033 (.021)	1.034	.082*** (.023)	1.086	.003 (.028)	1.003	.007 (.065)	1.007	.013 (.032)	1.013
Colleague	-.012 (.045)	.988	.012 (.049)	1.012	-.069 (.065)	.933	-.058 (.157)	.944	-.073 (.073)	.929
Member	.215*** (.040)	1.240	.173*** (.045)	1.189	.059 (.065)	1.060	.133 (.239)	1.142	.007 (.072)	1.007
Advisor	.058 (.053)	1.081	.070 (.057)	1.035	.041 (.075)	1.042	.234 (.196)	1.264	-.099 (.094)	.906
Acquaintance	.288 (.157)	1.333	-.042 (.174)	.959	.732** (.246)	2.079	1.407 (1.057)	4.085	.665** (.256)	1.944
Peers' membership			3.380*** (.211)	29.372	1.698*** (.323)	5.465	2.166*** (.574)	8.726	1.523*** (.429)	4.588
Spouse X membership					.800 (.447)	2.225	-1.084 (.923)	.338	1.471** (.575)	4.352
DNA relative X membership					.731*** (.215)	2.077	1.112** (.413)	3.040	.773** (.262)	2.167
Extended family X membership					.383* (.189)	1.466	.963 (.536)	2.620	.306 (.206)	1.357
Friend X membership					.494*** (.114)	1.639	.388 (.222)	1.474	.453** (.134)	1.573
Colleague X membership					.324 (.236)	1.383	.498 (.452)	1.645	.376 (.291)	1.456
Member X membership					.444* (.216)	1.559	.014 (.546)	1.014	.617* (.268)	1.853
Advisor X membership					.061 (.268)	1.063	-1.807** (.837)	.164	.904* (.399)	2.469
Acquaintance X membership					-2.067** (.836)	.127	-1.777 (2.143)	.169	-2.274* (1.078)	.103
Constant	-1.948*** (.113)	.143	-2.752*** (.143)	.064	-2.359*** (.145)	.094	-3.001*** (.355)	.050	-2.147*** (1.61)	.117
χ^2	298.319		369.270		265.528		71.642		178.913	
R ² Nagelkerke (%)	2.3		18.5		22.6		25.1		24.3	
N	2801		2801		2801		814		1987	

Table 7: Logistic regression table (M2) - DV = party membership

tion term between the type of ties and alters' party membership is considered, the analysis does not confirm that acquaintanceship with party members conveys membership to ego, confirming somehow that reporting a larger pool of acquaintances appears as a corollary pattern of having a larger network size, which both *per se* affects positively the odds of joining a party (for older citizens only). Nonetheless, in contrast, the party membership of two other weaker connections (advisor and organisation member) appears to be statistically significant and positively related to party membership, although the impact remains significant for older respondents only. This finding reinforces the argument that weak ties are relevant channels triggering party membership, but that networks as a vector of social capital become effective when people get older (larger networks, more weak ties).

It does not mean so far that the influence of strong ties must be denied. The regression table (Table 7) puts forward that there is evidence to claim that party membership is also driven by people to whom citizens are closely connected, especially among the youth (supporting H2). Among the older generation, the spouse's party membership is the first channel of membership, whereas youth party membership is boosted by the affiliation of DNA and extended family. As suggested earlier, this might also explain why network size is not statistically significant for younger respondents (but also why they had a larger positive coefficient for network density). The structure of their networks influences much less their odds of joining than its composition. From this, it might be argued that a major reason for explaining why young people stay away from traditional politics is because their proximate network core (i.e. their family and relatives) does not connect them to these traditional organisations, and that only a small proportion of the "privileged" is. Cross and Young (2008) suggested the hypothesis that access to parties through family members might have, in fact, increased in importance in recent decades, as more than 50% of party members under 25 years old who were surveyed in their research reported to have been recruited through family connections, compared to only 9% among older members. This striking generational discrepancy is deservedly questioned as to whether youth party membership would mirror an increased exclusivity in party recruitment patterns, despite many attempts to diversify and ease the barriers for entering these organisations. In that sense, youth party membership would respond nowadays more to a family habit, or tradition, than a genuine political commitment. The case of Belgium in itself can also help to untangle the significant role played by family ties. First, there is a high proportion of "filiations" ("son/daughter of") that can be found among politicians, candidates, and members, from the local to the national level (Wauters/Van Liefferinge 2015). Even if it has never been systematically quantified in a longitudinal manner or explored from a cultural point of view, this phenomenon greatly questions the diversity of the profiles that are drawn by Belgian political parties, feeding sometimes among ordinary citizens the image of "dynastic bias" within parties (Dal Bó et al. 2009). Second, the pillarisation of Belgian society has long implied that membership via relatives was a common way to join political parties for younger members, who were then directly enlisted on behalf of their parents, or indirectly via various satellite organisations (Van Haute et al. 2013). Furthermore, since the membership process became more individualised, membership fees are generally lowered as long as other relatives join or are already members.

Conclusion

In a context where traditional political participation is in decline, this paper addressed whether social networks, as sets of interpersonal relationships among individuals, are relevant channels for party membership, and in particular among the youth. Based on original cross-sectional survey data (N=2,801), the analysis explored how the structure and the homogeneous composition of citizens' social networks can generate or impede their engagement in a political party, with a specific comparison between young (18-34 years) and older citizens (35-65+). Three major findings concerning youth party membership can be summarised and further discussed in the light of their implications for recruitment, thereby contributing to both the supply- and demand-side of party membership literature.

First, compared to older respondents, party membership of younger citizens was not statistically influenced by the network structure. It was explained by the fact that the process is mostly driven by proximate social peers, to which they are tied via strong ties. Hence, second, the dominance of strong ties in the youth party membership process was seen as evidence of a certain exclusivity in recruitment patterns of political parties, which is likely to give insight on why many young citizens stay away from institutionalised forms of participation (highly dependent on the social and political composition of their proximate network core, i.e. their family). Indeed, third and finally, the homogeneous nature of their network composition, especially when the network is congruent to a high social and political profile, was shown to affect significantly their probability of joining a party. Nonetheless, the analysis showed that, under certain circumstances, social networks do affect the reproduction of social and political inequalities, confining recruitment targets to the most usual suspects of the population, and thereby explaining some of the difficulties of recruitment faced by Belgian party organisations.

[S]ocial networks do affect the reproduction of social and political inequalities, confining recruitment targets to the most usual suspects of the population[.]

Given the picture drawn by this paper, a perspective to consider in order to deal with the lack of youth involvement in traditional politics is to continue promoting institutional arrangements that are likely to ensure the enlargement, diversification and fostering of young adults' social networks throughout their schooling, and hence not only among the "most usual" suspects. Encouraging the development of exchanges between school classes of different neighbourhoods, the democratisation of mobility for students and early young workers, or indeed the interpersonal meeting of experts, politicians, social workers or professionals might be different aspects of a strategy to lower the time that network size might become effective in the political mobilisation of these categories of the population. In terms of social profiles, along with a continuous work towards the youth in general, an important target for Belgian political parties should be young women (18-35y.) and their friendship networks, in as much as the network gender bias affects statistically significantly more the younger respondents' membership process. This makes all the more sense given new institutional rules implemented in Belgium, which try to ensure more gender diversity in politics (Van Der Dussen 2013). A long-term targeted strategy on social media might be one way to cope with this chal-

lenge in practice. In terms of political profiles, the results recorded hypothesised that political parties attract young citizens that are integrated in networks of people homogeneously not satisfied with the way Belgian democracy is currently working. However, behind this positive sketch, an important undertaking would be to see which types of parties are joined when the network homogeneity tends towards dissatisfaction with democracy. Moreover, it would appear that political parties could actually try to mobilise more among networks that homogeneously embedded young people in a positive attitude towards democracy. More pragmatically, young party members joining political parties and being surrounded by people who tend to be politically interested and who identify with a party, fighting against the negative citizen perception of parties (exacerbated currently in Belgium because of various controversial issues and frequent government crises) by, among other things, improving the diversity and representativeness of elected officials (and not only of candidates) – thereby attracting wider identification – or by promoting newer forms and practices of democracy – thereby attracting more interest – might be represent a positive thread to follow in the attempt to mobilise through networks where apolitical and/or less interested young citizens are found. Finally, given that family ties are the most relevant channels of youth party membership, a last strategy to consider in order to break with the image of “dynasties” sometimes attached to Belgian parties is to work continuously on activating weak ties between their current members, among other things, by organising *ad hoc* social and mentoring activities (offline) or by using online tools that can help these political organisations to reach new and younger voters, supporters and members via the online friendship and acquaintanceship networks of their current members.

Notes

- 1 The appendix summarises the whole procedure, the exact wording of the question, and the derived variables’ operationalisation stemming from this process of network data collection. For the appendix, see page 23.
- 2 Spouse, close relative (DNA family), member of my extended family, friend, colleague, member of an organisation to which I belong, professional advisor, acquaintance, or other.
- 3 Please note that one item (“I don’t know”) was added for each question, except for socio-demographics. Alters for which information was unknown were removed from derived measurements. Alters’ descriptive statistics refer only to valid per cent. Hence, respondents for whom the information on a given attribute is unknown for the whole network were recoded as missing.
- 4 Respondents had to specify at least one name to carry out the whole survey.
- 5 Bivariate ANOVA tests statistically significant when comparing network size means by categories ($p=.001$), but not regarding density ($p=.091$).
- 6 Please note abbreviations shown in brackets from this point on: “s.” (statistically significant) and “n.s.” (non statistically significant).

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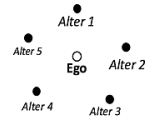
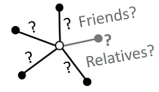

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Appendix - Network data collection and operationalisation

Name-generating procedure		Survey question	Network structure		Network composition		Network composition (derived)	
			Size	Density	Homophily (EI index)	Attribute	Homophily	Positive homophily
1) Name generator	 <p>List of significant social peers (alters)</p>	Could you give us the first names of maximum 10 people who are particularly important in your life, with whom you socialised during the last 6 months?	N social peers					
2) Name interpreter	 <p>Nature or strength of the ties between the respondent and the alters (ego-alters ties)</p> <p>Social and political attributes of each alter</p>	<p>Below, there is a list of ways people can be tied to each other. Some people can be connected through different ties at the same time. For instance, someone could be your sister, belonging to the same sports club as you, but also be your work colleague. For all the people you named in the first question, could you specify the type of tie(s) that mainly link(s) you (the most salient)?</p> <p>Traditional questions about socio-demographic background, political attitudes and behaviours. Exact same question wording and answer items for ego and alters.</p> <p>NB: "I don't know" added for alters.</p>			<p>Egos whose alters are mostly similar to them with respect to social and political attributes will have high homophily scores (+1) while those with more heterophily in their ego-networks will have a value closer to -1.</p>	<p>Mean value by network around each tie attribute</p> <p>Mean value by network around each node attribute</p>	<p>EI index recoded into binary form. 1 = homophilic network; 0 = heterophilic network.</p>	<p>Whether homophily occurs on high attribute scores or categories; recoded into binary form: 1 = yes; 0 = no.</p>
3) Name interrelater	 <p>Ties among alters, i.e. whether they know each other (or not)</p>	Could you specify if the people you named know each other?		Actual ties divided by potential ties				



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